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**As some 22 million people in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from HIV infection and AIDS, Josef Ratzinger tells them that condoms cannot stop the disease spreading – and might even make the pandemic worse.**

This latest foot-in-mouth gaffe from an almost unbelievably stupid man has brought well-deserved and unprecedented condemnation from around the world. Talking to journalists on the journey to the first stop on his African visit, Ratzinger said that HIV/AIDS was “a tragedy that cannot be overcome by money alone, that cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms, which can even increase the problem”.

Those engaged in AIDS prevention were dismayed by this callous and lethal inability to see beyond dogma. Prof Quentin Sattentau, Professor of Immunology at Oxford University said: “This represents a major step backwards in terms of global health education, is entirely counter-productive, and is likely to lead to increases in HIV infection in Africa and elsewhere. There is a large body of published evidence demonstrating that condom use reduces the risk of acquiring HIV infection, but does not lead to increased sexual activity.”

The *New York Times* in an editorial said the Pope deserved “no credence when he distorts scientific evidence” and the French Foreign Ministry was sharply critical, saying: “While it is not up to us to pass a judgment on the doctrines of the Church, we consider that such remarks put in danger public health policy and imperative needs regarding the protection of human life.” A contributor to the *Washington Post*, Robert S. McElvaine, Professor of Arts & Letters, Millsaps College, said that the Pope should be “impeached”. A practising Catholic he wrote: “Let’s start a movement within the Catholic Church to impeach Pope Benedict XVI and remove him from office. While we’re at it, let’s replace him with a woman.”

Belgian Health Minister Laurette Onkelinx said Ratzinger’s comments “... reflect a dangerous doctrinaire vision. His declarations could demolish years of prevention and education and endanger many human lives.” In Berlin, Ulla Schmidt of the health ministry, responded bluntly: “Condoms save lives, as much in Europe as in other continents.” The Dutch Development Minister, Bert Koenders, said: “It is extremely harmful and very serious that this pope is forbidding people from protecting themselves... There is an enormous stigma surrounding the subject of AIDS, and AIDS sufferers face serious discrimination. The pope is making matters worse.”

Meanwhile, the Spanish Government announced on the same day that the Pope made his remarks that it is sending 1 million condoms to Africa. "Condoms have been demonstrated to be a necessary element in prevention policies and an efficient barrier against the virus", the Spanish health ministry said. This is seen as another shot over the bows of the Vatican by a secularist government trying to shake off the overweening power of the Church.

John O'Brien of Catholics for Choice, said: "It took the church hierarchy 359 years to stop continuing the line taken by their predecessors on Galileo. We hope that this error does not take so long to change."

Meanwhile, the appalling Cormac Murphy O'Connor wrote to the *Times* complaining about a cartoon it had published in relation to the debacle. In an attempt to deflect attention from the Pope's stupidity, Murphy O'Connor tried the usual trick of trying to turn the Church into the persecuted victim. He wrote: "I was appalled at the tasteless cartoon depicting Pope Benedict XVI. No newspaper should show such disrespect to a person who is held in high esteem by a large proportion of Christians in the world. To pillory the Pope in this way is totally unacceptable."

See also:

[A pope who seems fallible](#)

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